

Rehana Ahmed. *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*. Manchester UP, 2015. Pp. x, 246. £80.00.

In May 2016, London elected its first Muslim mayor, Sadiq Khan, after an unprecedentedly “ugly” campaign in which coded racist epithets (“radical,” “dangerous”) were deployed by the Conservative candidate, Zac Goldsmith, to smear Khan (Hattenstone). Indeed, an op-ed by Goldsmith in *The Daily Mail*, headlined “Are We Really Going to Hand the World’s Greatest City to a Labour Party That Thinks Terrorists Is [sic] Its Friends?”, was accompanied by a photo of the 7/7 bomb blasts in London. Islamophobia, of course, has been on the rise, not just in Britain but globally, fuelled by the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the emergence of so-called political Islam. Rehana Ahmed’s *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism* is thus a timely monograph on a subject that matters very much beyond academic circles—that is, on the politics of representing Islam, Muslims, and their communities.

Ahmed’s concerns, however, are understandably more circumscribed than what an analysis of the current global dispensation calls for. She focuses on South Asian Muslims in Britain and their negotiations of the British state’s liberal multicultural rhetoric, particularly visible during the New Labour party’s embrace of cosmopolitanism after Margaret Thatcher’s more insular defense of old-fashioned Victorian values. Building on key critiques of liberal secularism made by Saba Mahmood, Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and Tariq Modood, Ahmed explores the “limits of liberalism” in accommodating the cultural and religious differences posed by Muslim communities in Britain (Ahmed 10). Alongside these critics, she argues against any firm demarcation between the public and the private, noting that the public sphere can never be neutral; hence, liberalism’s tendency to relegate Muslim practices to the private sphere necessarily marginalizes and depoliticizes religious minorities while reinforcing a set of dominant values (liberal, secular, individualistic). In arguing for a potential politics of faith, Ahmed critiques the New Atheists—figures like Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, and Richard Dawkins—who have espoused an unbending adherence to secularism. Ahmed also aims to restore the centrality of class in understanding the sociopolitical contexts of Muslims. As she argues, the well-rehearsed “liberal dichotomies”—“liberty versus authority, secularism versus religion, free speech versus censorship, universalism versus multiculturalism, feminism versus the family”—invariably employed to stigmatize Muslims in public discourse “stand in for and obfuscate structures of power” that have shaped

the conditions of existence for these minority communities (11). These two frames of analysis—the privatizing tendencies of liberalism and the material inequities of class—animate the chapters that follow.

The monograph begins with a terrific first chapter that reminds readers that Muslims did not simply arrive on British shores in the postwar era but were already a visible community in the early twentieth century. Ahmed analyzes a series of early twentieth-century markers of Muslim political presence: the burning of H. G. Wells' *A Short History of the World* in August 1938 by members of the Jamiat-ul-Muslimin—an organization associated with the East London Mosque—for disrespectful references to the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran (an incident that resonates across time with the burning of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford in 1989); the 1932 publication of *Angare*, an anthology of short stories by four Indian Muslims that critiques both colonial and religious authorities; Sajjad Zaheer's fictionalization of the experience of Muslim students in Britain in his 1938 novella *A Night in London*; and the publication of *Islamic Review* (founded in 1913), a journal that attempted to counter Muslim stereotypes. This is important archival work that retrieves the diverse political activities of Muslims during the early twentieth century and demonstrates how religious communities can be mobilized as a basis for political and collective action.

This excavation of a range of political stances—from faith-based protests to secular and literary interventions in the public sphere—narrows considerably in Ahmed's next four chapters on prize-winning and best-selling authors Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, and Nadeem Aslam, respectively. In assessing each author's oeuvre, Ahmed is concerned with the extent to which his or her body of work reinforces liberal orthodoxies: in other words, the primary political relationship she analyzes is between the novels and secular liberalism. Thus, she notes that *The Satanic Verses* (1988) enacts a "silencing of class as dissent [that] reveals the novel's liberalism and the limits of this liberalism for an anti-racist politics" (72). Furthermore, collective identities are displaced and the multiculturalism celebrated in the novel remains "largely confined to [an unthreatening] colour difference" that elides class difference (83). In her chapter on Kureishi, Ahmed argues that his characters' "autonomy from minority culture" reinforces "an individualism that actually operates comfortably within exclusionary liberal social formations" (95). The centrality of the antinomian individual in Kureishi's texts rehearses a stereotypical binary of secular freedom against oppressive religious conformity.

The fourth chapter deals with Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council's protests against the novel's representation of the Bangladeshi community. Although the novel's detailed ac-

count of the impoverishment riddling the denizens of the Tower Hamlets adds a materialist lens to Ali's portrayal, the novel falls prey to "postcolonial exoticism," to use Graham Huggan's term, in the way this space is separated and decontextualized from the broader social structures of Britain. This separation means that the patriarchal norms operating in the Bangladeshi Muslim community are never explained in conjunction with the "external social pressures" that exacerbate these norms (Ahmed 133). Chapter five focuses on Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), a novel about honor killings. Ahmed traces an ideological tension between the novel's desire to situate "the behaviour and practices of these British Muslims in their disenfranchisement," thereby eschewing "a liberal culturalism" on the one hand, and its "contradictory valorisation of individualism against communalism" that affirms liberal tenets, on the other (176). In her final chapter, Ahmed conducts a valuable study of four British Muslim memoirs to consider the generic limits of autobiographical representation. Insofar as autobiography is predicated on the "I" as the "universal subject," these narratives "enable, but also, conversely . . . circumscribe a critical engagement with public discourses about Islam" (185) by "valorizing certain subjectivities" that are more palatable to liberalism "at the expense of others" (189).

*Writing British Muslims* channels many key issues regarding the place of religion in the public sphere; the capacity of political institutions to accommodate minority practices; and the centrality of class-based inequities in the production of difference. It is therefore an important intervention into public discourses about Islam and Muslims. Yet the monograph suffers from an assumption symptomatic of the post-secularist critics from whom Ahmed draws her theoretical inspiration: it posits a reified and homogenous account of liberal secularism that is perceived to be automatically and necessarily exclusionary. Aamir Mufti puts it best when he skeptically asks, in relation to Asad's post-secular critique, "What exactly is meant and intended when *liberalism* is repeatedly invoked in this manner as the insidiously unmarked conceptual basis of any approach to contemporary Islamist politics?" (13; emphasis in original). After all, liberalism itself "can hardly be conceived of as a unitary intellectual system" (Mufti 13), and its multiple incarnations include varieties of communitarianism and social obligation, as any rigorous historical account of liberalism would testify. The thrust of Ahmed's monograph—to critique liberalism's failure to engage with religious difference and collective Muslim identities—is a *de rigueur* move in the academy, where decades of critical theory have been devoted to unmasking the hegemonic and less-than-universal premises of the Enlightenment, with good reason. Yet in today's geopolitical climate, with the current President of the US, Donald

Trump, openly attempting to enact travel bans from Muslim-majority countries; with the Australian Senator Pauline Hanson calling for the installation of surveillance cameras in mosques; with the former British Prime Minister David Cameron's full-throated support of Goldsmith's Islamophobic campaign; and with the unapologetic rise of fascist and nativist organizations across the globe, one can't help but ask: to what extent do liberal secularism and liberal multiculturalism currently stand as our predominant ideological norms, or function as the central paradigms by—or against—which Muslims are politically organizing themselves at this moment? Indeed, Ahmed's conclusion gestures in a different direction that I wish the book had explored more: while the Muslim South Asian texts she considers remain "hamstrung by a secular liberalism," she points to other texts—*The Road from Damascus* (2008) by the British Syrian Robin Yassin-Kassab and *The Minaret* (2005) by the Sudanese Leila Aboulela—that go beyond the "Manichean clash" of liberal secularism versus faith and individualism versus collectivity (Ahmed 218). We might thereby return to what is most valuable about Ahmed's first chapter: the archival evidence that there are multiple and complex ways in which Muslims have politicized their resistance and struggled for emancipation—some secular, some religious, some liberal, some not, and some that go beyond these occasionally constraining categories.

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#### Works Cited

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